

The Guernsey Lily

To have a plant species named after you is considered quite a coup and the Island of Guernsey has the honour to be immortalised in the name of a particularly lovely lily that grows wild in South Africa. Quite how the link was made is not at all clear; stories exist which even include a Japanese connection, but nothing is substantiated and this all adds to the mystery. The Lily in question, the "Guernsey Lily", has the botanical name *Nerine sarniensis*. Sarnia from which the name is derived was used by the Romans for our Island. The name of this flower is no modern invention for publicity purposes, as it was given officially to the plant by botanists in 1634. Even then it was strongly associated with the Island of Guernsey.

The local connection for this South African native dates from that time. Local legend has it that the first bulbs were washed ashore on the west coast at Cobo Bay from a ship wrecked on route from Japan. The flower is certainly exotic and could be thought to have an exquisite quality associated with the East, but the link looks tenuous and remains unproven. Perhaps a bag of bulbs did arrive here, perhaps with a captain of a merchant vessel, but the plants true home is in mountainous country in the Cape region of South Africa.

The Guernsey Lily grows on mountain slopes, which are hot and dry in the summer months, more or less free from frost and with a moist, cool, growing season in the winter. For those wishing to enjoy this flower in garden or greenhouse, this means summer dormancy of the bulbs in well drained soil, leaf growth and flowering in the autumn and a frost tender subject for our care and attention to be lavished upon. The flowers, which are held in heads of 10 to 15 blooms, can be crimson, scarlet, orange, pink and even white. In the wild all of the variants can be found although the orange variety "Corusca Major" is thought to be close to the original species that found its way to Guernsey. However others say different, maintaining that the first was in fact a salmon pink colour.

The Guernsey Lily was the first nerine to be cultivated in Europe and it is reported to have been grown in Paris in 1630. Guernsey's climate would have been and still is, suited to this plant and it is likely to have grown well and flourished in gardens on the Island. Perhaps this was the reason it was named after Guernsey.

Two hundred years later in the 1830s, Guernsey was developing quite a name for its several hundred graperies and greenhouses on the Island. The beginnings of its horticultural export trade were evident at the time. Nerine flowers were amongst the first blooms exported to London.

The Guernsey Lily can still be seen in flower in Island gardens in October and a handful of enthusiasts still grow them in greenhouses. It is a part of our horticultural heritage and a very attractive national flower for Guernsey.

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